

## ***Bruno Neveu. A Portrait in Ten Words***

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M. le Directeur de la Maison française d'Oxford,  
M. le Président de l'Association de la Maison française d'Oxford,  
Dear colleagues, dear friends,

I am very happy to be here today to share the memory of a much beloved friend, a rare person, both severe and playful, who died prematurely in 2004. But the challenge is immense. For him, about him, so many speeches have been made, so many tributes have been paid, so many articles and grateful obituaries have been written. So do not expect me to talk about Bruno Neveu's *oeuvre*, which is as imposing as it is important, but which goes far beyond my own field of expertise. Several of his former students – Jean-Claude Waquet, Jean-Louis Quantin, Sylvio de Franceschi – have already brilliantly documented it, and one should refer to their studies primarily<sup>1</sup>.

For my part therefore, being, at the time of his prominence, a young and admiring friend, I will restrict myself to sketching a few lines of his portrait, to make him visible to those who did not know him, or to revive the memories of those who had the good fortune to have met him. But which traits should I focus on? To make my choice, I have been guided by the ten letters that compose Bruno Neveu's name, treated in the manner of an acrostic, and I have identified ten words, without much effort I must say, as they quickly become obvious. These ten words, which I will try to illustrate, will be the main lines of the portrait I will draw. And let's start with the five letters of his first name, B.R.U.N.O.

### **B – Bruno the Carthusian**

On 4 November 1936, Bruno Neveu was born in Grenoble to a father who was a chemical engineer and a mother who was a very devout housewife. Through his baptism, he was placed under the protection of Saint Bruno the Carthusian, whose first institution, the Grande Chartreuse, established at the end of the 11th century, is one of the medieval jewels of this mountainous France, which is more a crossroad than a place of confinement. The Carthusian monks were a book-loving religious community, who considered reading as 'food for the soul' and established rich libraries. It is under this patronage that the Catholic religion enters the life of the young Bruno, who describes his first years as a long day of readings in the family library, full of books collected by three generations. Religion nourished him and defined him.

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<sup>1</sup> J.-L. Quantin, J.-Cl. Waquet (eds), *Papes, princes et savants dans l'Europe moderne. Mélanges à la mémoire de Bruno Neveu*, Genève 2007 ; S. H. De Franceschi, 'Bruno Neveu et la romanité', *Chrétiens et sociétés* 14, 2007. <http://journals.openedition.org/chretienssocietes/215> (29 December 2022).

Marc Fumaroli underlines this fact by comparing Neveu to Stendhal, another native of Grenoble, but his opposite. Unlike Stendhal, Bruno Neveu is attached to the Catholic side of his family, that of Beyle, that is to say priests, abbots and devotees, and not to the Gagnon side, those citizens of Voltairean France, anti-clerical, infatuated with all that is novel. For him, by contrast with the oppositions raised by Stendhal in *Le Rouge et le Noir*, the Rouge irrigates the Noir and the Noir the Rouge, in complete harmony<sup>2</sup>. During his years of study, Neveu scrutinises religion, and dissects it, in a critical and uncompromising manner, under the direction of eminent professors, such as Jean Orcibal, Gabriel Le Bras, at the Section des Sciences religieuses of the École Pratique des Hautes Études, or Alphonse Dupront, at the 6th Section. He would later say:

*Avoiding the Scylla of heavy-handed apologetics as well as the Charybdis of myopic hypercriticism, true history must join theological concepts and systems to general history, to the facts and realities of culture, and not to higher, dogmatic or metaphysical principles*<sup>3</sup>.

This choice resulted in his first thesis – he was to defend three – on the Jansenist historian Sébastien Lenain de Tillemont<sup>4</sup>.

If Neveu treats religion as a historian, he is no less committed to it in his personal life. But he never envisioned an ecclesiastical career, probably knowing too well the trappings of such a path, not only for the freedom of thought, but also, sometimes, for the very life of the spirit. In his last years, however, strongly disappointed by the aesthetic drift of the Second Vatican Council, he drew closer to the United Melkite Church and assiduously attended the small Parisian church of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre. There, every Sunday, he enjoyed the songs of Marie Keyrouz. It was in this context that he also passed away, at the age of 67, in the early hours of 24 March 2004, having just arrived in Raboueh, at the Greek-Catholic Patriarchate of Beirut, where he hoped to begin a new chapter of his life.

## **R – Rome / Romanitas**

The history of the Roman Church, from the Council of Trent to the French Revolution, was the most central subject of Bruno Neveu's studies, although he also explored the relations between France and the Holy See in the years 1808-1885. His investigation was comprehensive and cross-cutting, as it drew on the most varied methods and fields. According to his own description, his 'research focused on the boundaries, where law, theology, philosophy, history, philological and literary criticism overlap'<sup>5</sup>. But it also addressed the 'interior' of the Roman *magisterium*. Therefore, theology was for him a powerful weapon for scrutinising Roman

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<sup>2</sup> M. Fumaroli, 'Allocution', *Remise de l'épée d'académicien à Bruno Neveu*, Paris, 12 mars 2002, p. 16-19.

<sup>3</sup> B. Neveu, 'Juge suprême et docteur infailible: le pontificat romain de la Bulle *In eminenti* (1643) à la Bulle *Auctorem fidei* (1794)', *MEFR, Moyen Âge-Temps modernes*, XCIII/1, 1981, p. 215-275 : 'Évitant le Scylla de l'apologétique à gros grains comme le Charybde de l'hypercritique myope, la véritable histoire doit relier les concepts et les systèmes théologiques à l'histoire générale, au donné des faits et des réalités de culture, et non à des principes supérieurs, dogmatiques ou métaphysiques'.

<sup>4</sup> Id., *Sébastien Le Nain de Tillemont (1637-1698). Étude biographique et bibliographique d'après des documents inédits*, École pratique des hautes études, Paris 1965. Published under the title *Un Historien à l'école de Port-Royal. Sébastien Le Nain de Tillemont (1637-1698)*, La Haye 1966.

<sup>5</sup> Id, 'Remerciement', *Remise de l'épée d'académicien à Bruno Neveu*, Paris, 12 mars 2002, p. 36: '[...] des recherches sur les confins, là où règne l'imbrication entre droit, théologie, philosophie, histoire, critique philologique et littéraire'.

dogmatic politics and defining its modalities. In this sense, Neveu went entirely against the trend of historiography of his time, whose approach was resolutely and by choice external to the ‘object religion’.

But Neveu's positioning at the centre of *Romanitas* was not purely intellectual; it was also highly physical. For seven years, from 1966 to 1973, he stayed in Rome, an exceptional city ‘that gives rest from ambitious capitals’<sup>6</sup>. At a time when in France the May 1968 events were taking place, he had ‘the privilege of capturing the twilight images of a society that has remained faithful, by a kind of miracle, to the customs, rites and refinements of previous centuries’<sup>7</sup>. But this period was also and above all a period of intellectual discipline, of meticulous exploration of library collections and of the Vatican archives, which enabled him to carry out extensive research, as expressed in two major works, *Sébastien Joseph du Cambout de Pontchâteau (1634-1690) et ses missions à Rome, d'après sa correspondance et ses documents inédits*, 783 pages, published in 1969 in Paris; and the *Correspondance du nonce en France Angelo Ranuzzi (1683-1689)*, comprising 1,702 pages, published in Rome in 1973.

## U – University

If Bruno Neveu’s life was irrigated by religion, it also merged with his academic existence, so much so that he himself could say that his ‘life and his research overlap very closely’<sup>8</sup>.

It can be said, however, that Neveu's relationship to the university as such was clearly ambivalent. Having himself studied at the École des chartes and the École Pratique des Hautes Études, he was more the type of scholar who attended small seminaries and *scriptoria* than ambitious lectures organised by authoritative hierarchies. He even expressed, at times, his irritation towards the ‘White Sorbonne’, a building constructed at the very end of the 19th century in the spirit of the Opéra Garnier or the Gare d’Orsay, an impersonal construction, little or not propitious to collegiality, and which had, above all, wiped out the old Sorbonne, a modest building housing doctrinal disputes, but also a multitude of students from all social backgrounds, in an *esprit de corps*. In a rather crude comparison with British universities, he said in 1980:

*The simple comparison of images already speaks for itself. For example, that of Oxford or Cambridge – reliquaries venerated by uninterrupted streams of fervent visitors and former alumni –, and that of Louis Liard’s ‘White Sorbonne’, the heart of high French education, where the presence of the most prestigious past is only attested by a few late frescoes – besides the tragically eviscerated chapel and the lunar spaces of the Grand Amphitheatre*<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 34 : ‘[...] qui repose de nos capitales ambitieuses’.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 34: ‘J’eus le privilège de capter les images crépusculaires d’une société restée fidèle, par une sorte de miracle, aux usages, aux rites, aux raffinements venus des siècles précédents’.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 30 : ‘Ma vie et mes recherches se rejoignent et se recourent de si près [...]’.

<sup>9</sup> B. Neveu, ‘Oxford ou le passé en avance’, *Commentaire* 10 (1980/2), p. 286: ‘Le simple rapprochement des images parle déjà. Par exemple celle d’Oxford ou de Cambridge, reliquaires vénérés par des flots ininterrompus de visiteurs fervents et d’anciens *alumni*, et celle de la ‘blanche Sorbonne’ de Louis Liard, cœur du haut enseignement français où la présence du passé le plus prestigieux n'est attestée, en dehors de la chapelle tragiquement éviscée et des espaces lunaires du grand amphithéâtre, que par quelques fresques tardives’.

On the Palais de la Sorbonne, a stone allegory of the French *Alma Mater* which was abolished by decree in 1791, he wrote a rich and enlightening article, published in 1987 in the journal *Commentaire*<sup>10</sup>. However, what intrigued him most in the history of the French University was the institution's relationship with Rome and its *magisterium*. So, even at the peak of his career, he produced a third PhD thesis, this time in public law, on the Catholic theology faculties at the University of France, 1808-1885, *i.e.*, in the period when these faculties were administered by the State, until their complete abolition due to the impasses encountered<sup>11</sup>.

## **N – Negotiations**

As I said, Bruno Neveu's research employed many different methods and explored a wide variety of fields. Paradoxically, it was not in the Religious Sciences Section of the *École pratique des hautes études* – to which he was so close because of his concern for religion – that he was brought to teach, but in the neighbouring Section des Sciences historiques et philologiques.

His great work on the *Correspondance* of Angelo Ranuzzi, the Apostolic Nuncio in Paris under the reign of Louis XIV, which is also the heart of his *Thèse d'État*, earned him recognition as an eminent specialist in the history of negotiations, and it was therefore in the field of diplomatic history that he was elected to take up the position of Directeur d'études on his return from Rome in 1973. It was therefore diplomatic history that he taught throughout his career as a professor, until his entering the Académie des Sciences morales et politiques in 2002. It was in this field that he also had many prominent disciples, one of whom – Jean-Claude Waquet – is with us today.

## **O – Oxford**

Now we come to what is certainly the most expected part of this lecture, and also the object of my visit today: I mean the Oxford stay of Neveu, who was already an Associate Member of All Souls College before being appointed, for four years (1981-1984), Director of the Maison française.

In the pantheon of exceptional cities, Oxford stands, for Neveu, in the same rank as Rome. But even more than Rome, with its decaying hieratic hustle and bustle, Oxford is his intellectual home, the place most suited to his conception of the academic world – the scholarly commerce – and, therefore, to his way of life. Fumaroli, talking again to Neveu, says of this Oxonian sojourn:

*After your long Roman season came the English season. You were very early attached to Oxford where you saw, as in scholarly and ecclesiastical Rome, a centre of continuity faithful to the humanities of the Renaissance, faithful to the most profound sense of Catholicism, which had its English revival in the person of John Newman, faithful also, as far as possible, to the dynasty of the Stuarts, in which you were very much interested, as well as to the Jacobite diaspora on the Continent. You had already made many good*

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<sup>10</sup> Id., 'Le Palais de la Sorbonne', *Commentaire* 39 (1987/3), p. 597-610.

<sup>11</sup> Id., *L'Église et l'Université de France: les facultés de théologie catholique des académies (1808-1885)*. Thèse de doctorat en Droit public, Université Paris-II Assas, Paris 1993.

*friends there, notably in the most prestigious of the colleges of this studious city, All Souls. You returned as Director of the Oxford House*<sup>12</sup>.

And Alain Besançon continues:

*I don't know how you managed to give to this grey cement rectangle a kind of grace and style. It was your good grace and your style that you imparted to the building. You managed the house wonderfully. You understood your role and your duty as that of an initiator to the thousand subtleties of Oxonian life, to the delights of the most old-fashioned rituals, the pomp of solemn dinners, the even more distinguished casualness of candlelight and port desserts. You knew how to instruct the newcomer, to teach him when to put on his dinner jacket, when to put on his gown, and when to put on both his dinner jacket and his gown, when to take them off. But what you still preferred were the magnificent religious ceremonies, the impeccable chanted liturgies [...]. Oh, this was beautiful! At all the high tables we dined at, you held the fellows under the spell of your conversation. You were adored at Oxford. You made your country proud*<sup>13</sup>.

These are two testimonies –and there are many others, which we will perhaps be able to share at the end of this lecture – which recall the caring, efficient, but also playful presence of the former director of the Maison française d'Oxford. These descriptions of friends, of guests, should not make us forget, however, that Bruno Neveu also explored Oxonian history from the inside, driven by his interest in the University, and European universities in all their manifestations. It should also be remembered that he devoted a rich and enlightening article to Oxford for the French public, 'Oxford, ou le passé en avance', published in 1980 in the journal *Commentaire*<sup>14</sup>. I have already quoted a passage from it above. Finally, let me add that Bruno Neveu's facetious taste for ritual and academic elegance blossomed in Oxford. Some years later, he joined the Burgon Society.

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In Bruno's first name and in five words, I have found some reasons to present, in an admittedly impressionistic way, some outlines of his life and his academic career. Let me now turn to his surname, whose five letters N.E.V.E.U. will perhaps allow me to illustrate some salient features of his method and his personality.

## **N – Nostalgia**

As well as austere criticism, nostalgia runs through Neveu's work, and even informs it. Nostalgia is primarily a way of life, as Neveu artfully mixes past, present and future, navigating his way through these three dimensions, making them interact with each other. In his childhood, it was nostalgia that introduced him to the world; it also gave him his own place in it. Shortly before his death, Neveu wrote about his years of childhood, which were also years of war. Hardly coming out of his parents' home, confining himself to the family library, as said, he

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<sup>12</sup> M. Fumarolli, 'Allocution', *Remise de l'épée d'académicien à Bruno Neveu*, Paris, 12 mars 2002, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> A. Besançon, 'Allocution', *Remise de l'épée d'académicien à Bruno Neveu*, Paris, 12 mars 2002, p. 7-8.

<sup>14</sup> B. Neveu, 'Oxford ou le passé en avance', *Commentaire* 10 (1980/2), p. 286-303.

underwent an ‘incubation’ caused by books almost exclusively produced in the 19th century. He therefore remarks:

*At the end of such an incubation, it was not surprising that the years of adolescence and youth fostered a predilection, even a reverence, for a past - the long nineteenth century, from 1800 to 1914 - that was still quite close, marked by the urbanity of social interaction, the sustained interest in moral sciences, the penchant for introspection*<sup>15</sup>.

A learning experience, nostalgia is also a theoretical model for Neveu. When it comes to synthesising the work of Alphonse Dupront, one of his masters, he places a fascinating sentence in the foreground, which alone could sum up the historian's approach: ‘To understand is to grasp the past and the present together’<sup>16</sup>.

### **E – Erudition / Error**

However, in order to make nostalgia a strength, a method, it is necessary to avoid, at all costs, surrendering to it with indulgence. Therefore, it is the responsibility of intellectual asceticism, of ‘severe studies’, to make nostalgia bear fruit and to lead it along the path of historical truth. This is the role of erudition, to which Neveu certainly devoted most of his life, tirelessly exploring corpuses of Latin archives, patiently grasping the most minute points of certain records. One must also say that his highly complicated subjects imposed this: Gallican ecclesiology, the Augustinianism of Port-Royal, the opposition between the French Jansenist party and the Roman *Curia*, the procedures for investigating heresy in the 17th century, infallibility.

Note that for the letter E, I had a difficult choice. Indeed, another word was also essential, ‘error’. To this notion and to its treatment by the Roman *magisterium*, Neveu devoted a major study, 759 pages long, published in Naples in 1993, ‘at the cost of new and immense research in the canonical In-folios and in the files of the Holy Office’<sup>17</sup>. This book is *L’Erreur et son juge*<sup>18</sup>.

### **V – Vanity**

An austere scholar, Neveu allowed himself very few distractions, but took great pleasure in spending his spare time in academic sociability. As mentioned previously, he had even become an expert in this field during his Oxonian period, which had led him, among other things, to become a member of the Burgon Society. Since then, nothing remained hidden from him in the field of *res vestiaria*.

Putting his knowledge into practice, he no longer refrained from displaying the most unusual elements of academic costume. At a mature age, and with his career already well established, he did not hesitate to engage in any examination, any election, any administrative position – he

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<sup>15</sup> Id., ‘Remerciement’, *Remise de l’épée d’académicien à Bruno Neveu*, Paris, 12 mars 2002, p. 32: ‘Au terme d’une semblable incubation, il n’y avait rien de surprenant à ce que les années d’adolescence et de jeunesse entretinssent une prédilection, voire une révérence pour un passé encore assez proche – le long XIXe siècle, de 1800 à 1914 – marqué par l’urbanité des échanges de société, l’intérêt soutenu pour les sciences morales, le penchant à l’introspection’.

<sup>16</sup> Id., ‘Naissance de la modernité: l’Europe, les Églises’, in Fr. Crouzet (ed.), *L’Europe dans son histoire. La vision d’Alphonse Dupront*, Paris 1998, p. 79: ‘Comprendre, c’est saisir ensemble le passé et le présent’.

<sup>17</sup> M. Fumarolli, ‘Allocution’, *Remise de l’épée d’académicien à Bruno Neveu*, Paris, 12 mars 2002, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> B. Neveu, *L’erreur et son juge. Remarques sur les censures doctrinales à l’époque moderne*, Naples 1993.

became even President of the EPHE – as long as an additional ornament, an *épitoge* or a *jabot*, was associated with it. ‘I am quite vain, but I don’t think I am conceited’, he reportedly said on this matter to his disciple Jean-Louis Quantin<sup>19</sup>.

However, Neveu was saddened by the lack of interest shown by his French colleagues in academic pageantry, not to say by their contemptuous ignorance on the subject. Worse, he faced a major obstacle in his own institution. For the professors of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, to which he belonged, did not have the use of academic costume. The unspoken purpose of his principal article on the subject, ‘Le costume universitaire français: règles et usages’, published in the very official *Revue administrative* in 1996, was thus intended to resolve once and for all this challenging difficulty, so disturbing for a personality attached to customs and traditions.

*After having been denied the wearing of an official costume similar to that of the University of France, the masters attached to the Grands Établissements have taken glory from this situation [...]. At present, however, some of these Grands Établissements have doctoral schools, they enjoy the same degree accreditation as the universities, they have examinations defended before committees, and solemnly confer doctorates honoris causa. The statuses of their academic staff are similar to those of universities. This is the case for the École Pratique des Hautes Études, the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and the Institut d’études politiques, among others. What costume should the professors and lecturers of these institutions wear, when circumstances demand it? Unless the ministerial authority considers creating costumes specific to these corps, it would be necessary to proceed by assimilation [...]. The problem of the Grands Établissements having the character of doctoral schools could thus be solved in accordance with existing regulations and customs, without trespassing on the privileges of faculty bodies where the professorship and the costume associated with it are obtained through competition. It would only remain to free and preserve the official costume of French higher education from alterations due to carelessness, and to assure it the symbolic place it deserves in the public life of France<sup>20</sup>.*

And indeed, this paper, which has now become famous, has made it possible to officially establish that all the Directors of Studies at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* are entitled to wear the magnificent Jonquille or Amaranth suit, created in the 19th century, and ‘which surpasses almost all its foreign equivalents, those of the Anglo-Saxon countries in particular, by the width of its cut and the brilliance of its colours’<sup>21</sup>.

## **E – Empathy / Einfühlung**

To overcome ten years of pain, and to bring to an end, with determination, the 759 pages of a book as elaborate as *L’Erreur et son juge*, or the 1702 pages of the *Correspondance d’Angelo Ranuzzi*, Neveu had to be driven by something more than nostalgia and erudite ascesis. This other element was empathy, a notion raised as a method by Jean Orcibal, referring to the German

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<sup>19</sup> B. Neveu quoted by Jean-Louis Quantin, *Annuaire de l’EPHE, SHP 2003-2004*, Paris 2005, p. xxxv: ‘Je suis assez vaniteux, mais je ne crois pas être orgueilleux’.

<sup>20</sup> B. Neveu, ‘Le costume universitaire français: règles et usages’, *Revue administrative* 293, 1996, p. 495-496.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 485.

‘Einfühlung’. Sylvio de Franceschi, in his article on ‘Bruno Neveu et la romanité. Sources historiographiques et méthode’, devotes several pages to this notion, which is fundamental to the historical approach of Orcibal and his disciples<sup>22</sup>. But what is it about?

In 1968, Orcibal emphasised the need for the historian of religion to achieve ‘a unitive experience, ‘Einfühlung’ or knowledge from within, the results of which will impose themselves on very different minds’<sup>23</sup>. This empathetic approach does not mean abandoning impartiality, as philology, text history and an irreproachable knowledge of chronology should always serve the historian. Thus Bruno Neveu could, in his turn, speak of ‘historical approaches, accomplished without any dogmatic a priori, but enveloped by a methodological sympathy which, by being purified by scholarly asceticism, allow access in the order of knowledge to a unitive experience close to that of the religious order’<sup>24</sup>.

## U

### Urbanity

Nostalgia, erudition, empathy: those are therefore the methodological lines that define Bruno Neveu’s approach and which happily appear also on the letters of his surname, sprinkled with a dash of vanity. This brings me to the tenth and final word in this portrait, Urbanity. This word, I believe, sums up what I hope will now be completely obvious. And if I had to keep only one of the ten, it would of course be this one.

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<sup>22</sup> S. H. De Franceschi, ‘Bruno Neveu et la romanité’, *Chrétiens et sociétés* 14, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> J. Orcibal, ‘Histoire du catholicisme moderne et contemporain’, *Problèmes et méthodes d’histoire des religions. Mélanges publiés par la Section des Sciences religieuses à l’occasion du centenaire de l’École pratique des hautes études*, Paris 1968, p. 251-260: ‘[L’Historien] pourra ainsi accéder à une expérience unitive, *Einfühlung* ou connaissance par l’intérieur, dont les résultats s’imposeront à des esprits très différents’.

<sup>24</sup> B. Neveu, *L’erreur et son juge. Remarques sur les censures doctrinales à l’époque moderne*, Naples 1993, p. 13 : ‘[...] des démarches historiques, accomplies en dehors de tout a priori dogmatique, mais enveloppées par une sympathie méthodologique qui, en se purifiant par l’ascèse érudite, permettent d’accéder dans l’ordre du savoir à une expérience unitive voisine de celle de l’ordre religieux’.